

Message Text

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ACTION EA-06

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0000

INFO AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY

AMEMBASSY SUVA

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 CANBERRA 6593

LIMDIS

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PEPR, PGOV, PINT, AS

SUBJECT: FRASER FACES CALLS FOR RESIGNATION

1. SUMMARY: THE WITHERS/ROBINSON AFFAIR TOOK A SHARP TURN FOR THE WORSE LAST THURSDAY WITH MEDIA ALLEGATIONS THAT THE PRIME MINISTER TRIED TO GET FORMER (AND NOW RE-INSTATED) FINANCE MINISTER ERIC ROBINSON TO WRITE A LETTER MODIFYING TESTIMONY ROBINSON HAD MADE TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INQUIRY ON QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL BOUNDARY NAME CHANGES. THE OPPOSITION HAS CALLED UPON FRASER TO EITHER FLATLY DENY IT OR RESIGN. FRASER HAS THUS FAR DECLINED TO DO THE FORMER, LEADING TO MOUNTING SPECULATION THAT HE MAY, IN FACT, HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE VERY ACT FOR WHICH WITHERS WAS FIRED. THIS OTHERWISE RATHER FLIMSY ISSUE (ESSENTIALLY OVER AN ELECTORAL

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BOUNDARY NAME CHANGE) HAS NOW REACHED PROPORTIONS THAT THE MEDIA AND OTHERS ARE BEGINNING TO TALK ABOUT THE POSSIBLE RESIGNATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER. ON BALANCE, WE DO NOT BELIEVE THIS IS LIKELY AT THIS TIME OR OVER THIS ISSUE, BARRING THE OPPOSITION'S PRODUCING SOME CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF FRASER'S EXPLICIT COMPLICITY. IN THAT CASE, ALL OBSERVERS AGREE THE PRIME MINISTER WOULD HAVE TO RESIGN

IMMEDIATELY. HE WOULD MOST LIKELY BE SUCCEEDED BY SNEDDEN, KILLEN OR PEACOCK, BUT IN ANY EVENT, THE LIBERAL/COUNTRY PARTY COALITION HAS THE NUMBERS IN PARLIAMENT TO WITHSTAND ANY RPT ANY PRESSURE FROM THE OPPOSITION OR ANYONE ELSE. THUS, EVEN IF FRASER WERE TO BE REPLACED BY HIS OWN PARTY, THE COALITION GOVERNMENT WOULD REMAIN IN POWER. END SUMMARY.

2. THE WITHERS-ROBINSON AFFAIR TOOK A SHARP TURN FOR THE WORSE THURSDAY WITH THE ALLEGATION BY "THE BULLETIN" THAT PRIME MINISTER FRASER "ASKED" FORMER FORMER FINANCE MINISTER ERIC ROBINSON (WHO WAS THE SUBJECT OF A ROYAL COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO ELECTION IMPROPRIETIES IN QUEENSLAND) TO WRITE A LETTER STATING THAT HIS TESTIMONY (THAT THE PRIME MINISTER WAS PRESENT AT A JANUARY 17TH MEETING WHEN WITHERS' INTERVENTION BEFORE THE QUEENSLAND ELECTORAL COMMISSION WAS DISCUSSED) HAD BEEN BASED UPON MEMORY AND WAS THEREFORE PERHAPS NOT ACCURATE. ROBINSON HAS DENIED THAT THE PRIME MINISTER PRESSURED HIM TO CHANGE HIS TESTIMONY, BUT HAS NOT GONE FURTHER BY STATING THAT HE WASN'T ASKED TO WRITE SUCH A LETTER. THE PRIME MINISTER HAS SAID HE DOESN'T REMEMBER BEING AT A JANUARY 17TH MEETING, HAS DENIED HAVING TRIED TO INFLUENCE ROBINSON'S TESTIMONY, BUT HAS ALSO REFUSED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT A LETTER TO OR FROM ROBINSON.

3. THE LABOR OPPOSITION HAS ALMOST IGNORED MORE FUNDAMENTAL AND PRESSING ISSUES SUCH AS THE BUDGET IN ORDER TO PURSUE
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THEIR ATTACK ON FRASER. SCENTING BLOOD, THEY HAVE GATHERED FOR, IF NOT THE KILL, AT LEAST THE CARRION. THEY HAVE CALLED UPON FRASER TO DENY HAVING WRITTEN ROBINSON ATTEMPTING TO INFLUENCE THE CHARACTER OF THE LATTER'S TESTIMONY, BUT THEY ARE UNLIKELY TO BE SATISFIED IF FRASER DOES, IN FACT, DENY IT. MEANWHILE, SPECULATION HAS GROWN ABOUT THE PRIME MINISTER'S CANDOR. AN EDITORIAL CARTOON IN TODAY'S "NATIONAL TIMES" SUMS THE SITUATION UP BY SHOWING AN EMBATTLED FRASER IN A GUN BUNKER ASKED TO DENY HE WROTE SUCH A LETTER, REPLYING "NOT UNTIL I KNOW WHO'S GOT COPIES." THE "AUSTRALIAN" THIS MORNING EDITORIALIZED "WHAT AN INCREDIBLE WEEK: ANY SUGGESTION THAT FRASER SHOULD BE REPLACED AS PRIME MINISTER WOULD BLOW THE ALREADY ABSURDLY OVERBLOWN WITHERS AFFAIR TO RIDICULOUS PROPORTIONS...IT MAY AMUSE MR. FRASER TO PLAY SEMANTIC GAMES IN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON THE MATTER...BUT IT

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DOES NOT AMUSE THE PEOPLE. IF HE SAID NOTHING TO MR.
ROBINSON ON THE MATTER, THEN HE SHOULD SAY SO. IF HE
SAID SOMETHING, THEN HE SHOULD SAY SO. HE WOULD LOSE FEW
MARKS IF HE WERE TO ADMIT THAT HIS RECOLLECTION OF WHAT
HAPPENED ON JANUARY 17TH AND WHO SAID WHAT WERE HAZY IN
HIS MIND. PEOPLE WILL APPRECIATE THAT, IN HIS JOB,
CONFUSION CAN OCCUR. BUT THEY WILL NOT ACCEPT PREVARICATION.
IT SMACKS TOO MUCH OF THE 'DIRTY TRICKS DEPARTMENT' MADE
FAMOUS BY WATERGATE." AND THAT SEEMS TO BE THE TYPICAL
REACTION FROM MOST OBSERVERS. NO ONE SEEMS PARTICULARLY
CONCERNED ABOUT THE ISSUE (THE ELECTORAL NAME CHANGE)
WHICH LED TO THIS CONFRONTATION, BUT ALL OBSERVERS AGREE
THAT IF FRASER DID, IN FACT, MISLEAD PARLIAMENT -- OR IF HE
CONTINUES TO DENY HAVING TRIED TO INFLUENCE ROBINSON'S
TESTIMONY AND EVIDENCE (SUCH AS A LETTER) TO THE CONTRARY
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IS SUBSEQUENTLY PRODUCED, IT WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY REQUIRE
HIS RESIGNATION.

4. IT SHOULD BE NOTED HERE THAT FRASER WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY
PLACE HIGHLY IN ANY "LEAST-LIKED" AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL
POPULARITY CONTEST. THE LIBERAL PARTY IS NOT NOTED FOR ITS

CHARITY TOWARD ITS "USED" POLITICIANS. WHEN THE END COMES, IT IS USUALLY MERCIFULLY SWIFT, IF NOT ALWAYS PARTICULARLY CHRISTIAN... FRASER HAS BEEN HARSH AND INTOLERANT TOWARD BOTH HIS LOYAL SUPPORTERS (FORMER PARTY LEADER SNEDDEN, FORMER SHADOW HEALTH, SOCIAL SECURITY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS MINISTER DON CHIPP, FORMER ATTORNEY GENERAL ELLICOTT, FORMER TREASURER LYNCH, NOW SENATOR WHITERS, WHO WAS DEPUTY LEADER FOR THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE)) AND HIS BACKBENCHERS IN GENERAL. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT A "DUMP FRASER" MOVEMENT WOULD HAVE NO TROUBLE GATHERING SUPPORT. WE DO QUESTION, HOWEVER, WHETHER HIS PARTY IS LIKELY TO SEE THIS AS THE TIME OR THE ISSUE.

5. ON BALANCE, THE EMBASSY DOES NOT SEE THINGS AS HAVING YET REACHED THE "MAKE OR BREAK" STAGE FOR FRASER (SHOULD BE NOTED HERE THAT THERE IS A DIVERGENCE WITHIN THE MISSION, AND THAT THE AMBASSADOR BELIEVES FRASER'S FUTURE IS MUCH MORE PRECARIOUS -- HIS DEPARTURE MORE IMMINENT). FRASER'S DEPARTURE COULD COME IF EVIDENCE OF AN EXPLICIT DECEPTION IS PRODUCED, OR IF HIS OWN PARTY TURNS ON HIM. IT IS NOT LIKELY TO COME IN THE ABSENCE OF BOTH OF THOSE TWO THINGS. IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT THE LIBERAL/ COUNTRY PARTY COALITION HAS THE VOTES TO TURN BACK ANY CHALLENGE FROM THE OPPOSITION OR ANYONE ELSE. IT MAY DECIDE TO SELECT A NEW LEADER (AND OUR GUESS WOULD BE SNEDDEN, KILLEN, OR PEACOCK), BUT IT HAS NO CLEARLY EMERGENT REPLACEMENT FOR FRASER AND BECAUSE OF ITS OVERWHELMING

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NUMBERS IN PARLIAMENT ANY CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT (AS OPPOSED TO A CHANGE IN PRIME MINISTER) SIMPLY ISN'T IN THE CARDS AT THIS TIME.

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